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TAGS: [PREL](#) [AMGT](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: MFA STEERS DIPLOMATS TO SHELL SCHOOL: "YOUR
CHILDREN ARE OUR CHILDREN"

REF: DAMASCUS 108

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. During a February 12 meeting with concerned diplomats, SARG MFA Deputy FM Abd al-Fatta Ammura said he believed that the Ministry of Education would not object to the expansion of a Royal Dutch Shell-operated school to include the children of diplomats. Outlining a series of steps that would start with an "agreement in principle," Ammura suggested the Ministry of Education would turn a blind eye to the presence of diplomats' children at the Shell school pending a necessary cabinet decision to allow it. Ammura indicated that the MFA's long-term solution to the lack of an Anglophone international school was to look to the private sector, acknowledging, however, that a change would have to be made to Syrian law. Asked about the letter addressed to FM Muallim seeking clarification regarding the promise made by President Asad to former President Carter, Ammura said the letter had been sent to "those who closed" the Damascus Community School and provided no further information. End Summary.

EXPAND THE SHELL SCHOOL

¶2. (C) SARG MFA Deputy FM Abd al-Fatta Ammura told diplomats February 12 that the MFA sought to facilitate the enrollment of diplomats' children in the soon-to-be reopened school operated by Royal Dutch Shell. Acknowledging that Aleppo-based ICARDA had declined to open a branch school in Damascus for expatriates (reftel), Ammura said the MFA wanted to be as helpful as possible to the diplomatic community; "your children are our children," he said. Ammura ran through his understanding of the procedures that will convert the current Shell "learning hub" into a licensed school, noting that the Shell school's previous license would soon be re-activated. That license would permit Shell to enroll only the children of its expatriate employees, he observed, but there were only 16 children in that category. Ammura said he thought a case could be made to the SARG Minister of Education that a school for only 16 pupils would not be feasible and that the diplomatic children could be added even in advance of the cabinet decision necessary to convert the Shell-only license into one that would include diplomats' children as well. Ammura estimated that Shell would be able to admit as many as 100 students for grades K-6 (Note: Per reftel, Shell itself says it can handle 50-60 but these capacity estimates may depend on the size of the premises to which the school relocates. End Note).

¶3. (C) Ammura thought that there was a logical argument to put to the Minister of Education: Shell needed to acquire premises for future estimated enrollment, not just the 16 Shell pupils, so Shell would need the Minister's "acceptance in principle" now that the license would be broadened. Ammura also suggested that the Minister would turn a blind eye to the presence of the diplomats' children during the conversion process from hub to school.

ULTIMATE SOLUTION: PRIVATE-SECTOR INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

¶4. (C) Reaction from the diplomats was generally positive, with the Argentinean Ambassador offering to provide to the MFA a list of children of diplomats whose parents seek to enroll them at the Shell school. The Canadian Ambassador, after confirming the MFA was aware of ICARDA's negative

decision, asked if Ammura was aware of any other options, including commercial ventures. Ammura indicated that he and FM Walid al-Muallim believed that ultimately the solution to establishing an international school in Damascus would require a private sector initiative but he noted that Syrian law would require an amendment to make such a project possible. Other heads of mission attending were the Czech, Dutch, Italian, and Hungarian ambassadors as well as the German and U.S. Charges d'Affaires. (Note: Although we had been included at all preparatory and follow-up meetings, this meeting marks the first time we participated in a meeting at the MFA on this topic. End Note)

NO RESPONSE TO U.S. LETTER

15. (C) In response to Ammura's review of possible options, Charge asked Ammura if he had seen a copy of the letter sent to FM Muallim to ask for clarifications regarding the promise provided to former President Carter by SARG President Bashar al-Asad regarding the opening or re-opening of (an/the) American school" after the inauguration. Ammura responded that he had seen the letter and that it had been "passed to those who had closed the school (Damascus Community School) for them to decide if they wanted to take any action." He provided no further details.

16. (C) Comment: Ammura, probably faithfully reflecting Muallim's views, tried to steer the group of diplomats into accepting an interim solution represented by an expanded Shell school with a longer-term option for a private-sector international school. He seemed confident the Minister of Education would be amenable to expanding the Shell school to include the children of diplomats, claiming to have consulted with the Minister immediately prior to the February 12 meeting. While Ammura obviously did not want to engage on the question of reopening the Damascus Community School, ambassadors routinely raise the issue in their calls on SARG ministers, including the Minister of Education. In a meeting with the Norwegian Ambassador during the week of February 8, the Minister of Education reportedly responded to the Norwegian's inquiry by observing that the Damascus Community School had been closed but its license had not been withdrawn, leading the Norwegian to wonder whether the Minister was re-thinking the matter. Our reading of the situation is that the school, like other operational issues in the bilateral relationship, is now on the SARG's negotiating agenda and that the SARG will seek to receive something in return for a decision to reopen the school. Should the SARG agree to reopen the school, however, it is likely to do so with the same restrictions in place (no Syrian students) that were attached to the license, casting strong doubt on the financial feasibility of a reopened school.

CONNELLY